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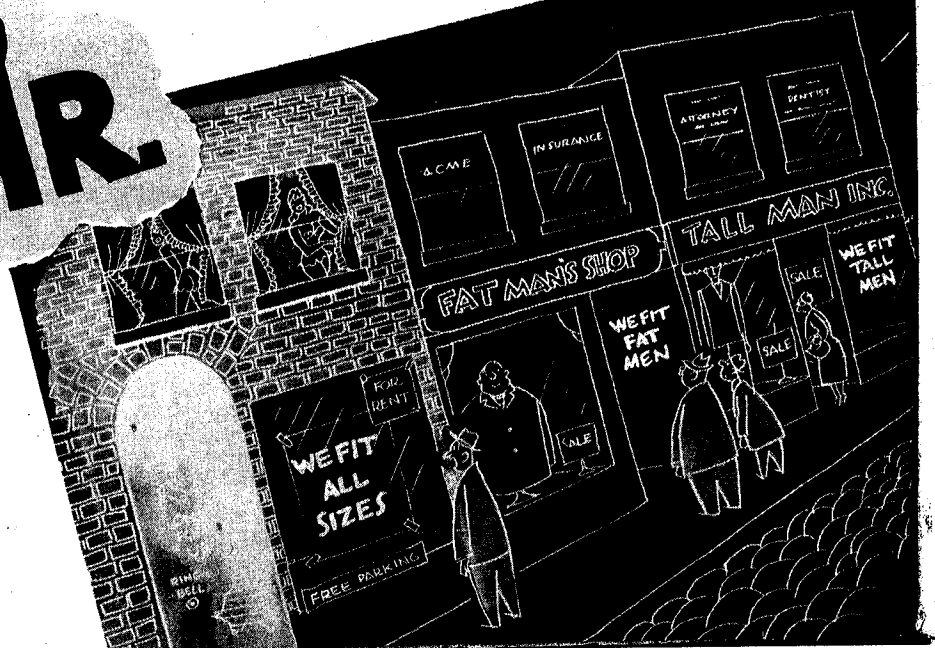
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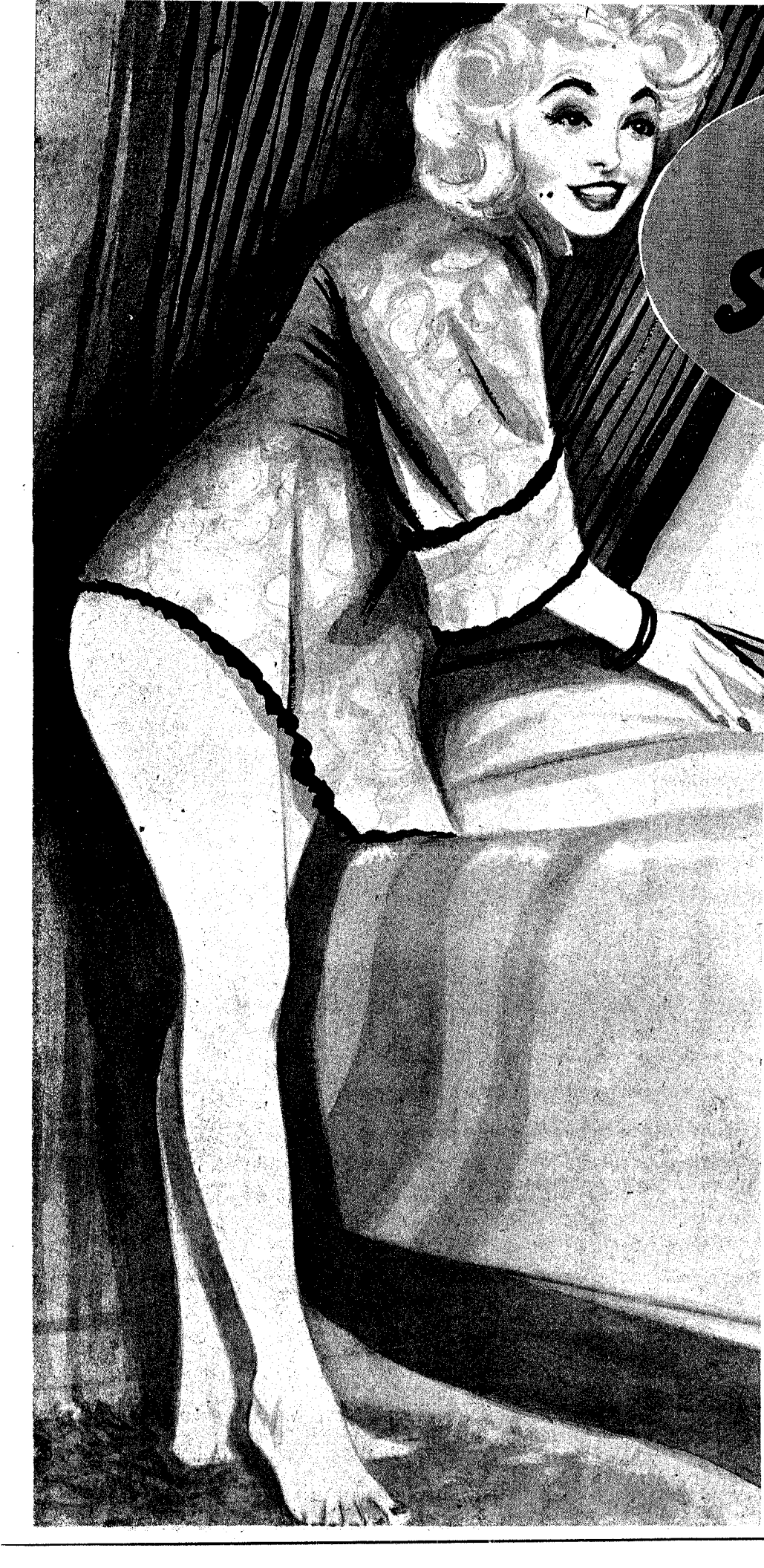
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NO SHROUD

By JACK RITCHIE

WE sat at the kitchen window watching the detail of men digging near the rose bushes. It was six o'clock and the sun was beginning to go down.

"I don't know what my wife will think about this," I said. "She's very particular about the garden. She won't even allow me to enter it."

Sergeant Peterson was a big man in a wrinkled suit. He grunted absently. "We'll put back every blade of grass if we have to. But I'm not betting on it."

I clasped my hands on the table. "I hardly think that just because some woman makes an anonymous phone call it gives you the right to ruin Evelyn's garden."

Peterson yawned. "I gave you your chance. You just don't answer my questions right."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know all the answers." I rubbed at the tightness in the back of my neck. "Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

I got an extra cup and put it in front of him.

PETERSON flipped through his grimy notebook. "We'll go around once more. Where is your wife?"

"I told you, sergeant. She's been away for the last week. She went to some small town in Iowa where her sister lives, but I just can't remember the name of the place. Evelyn dropped everything when she heard her sister was ill and rushed right over."

"Sure," Peterson said dryly. "And also you can't even remember the sister's last name."

"She just got married, sergeant,

Sergeant Peterson
was definitely on the
trail of something—
but his antagonist
was far foxier than
he thought

and she moved there only a month ago." I nodded earnestly. "But I do remember that her maiden name was Emily Turner. Yes, I'm quite sure of that."

Peterson laughed. "Now that's a real big help." He watched me curiously. "Didn't your wife leave the address somewhere around here? Just in case of an emergency?"

I smiled. "Evelyn doesn't believe in an emergency she can't handle herself."

He toyed with his cup. "You got a picture of your wife?"

I went to the bedroom and came back with the enlarged photograph Evelyn kept on her dressing table. "This was taken at a picnic last summer. It's one of her favorites."

Peterson's eyes narrowed as he looked at it.

"The man next to us is Frank Grady," I said. "I believe he's a detective or something on the police force. Quite a handsome man, isn't he?"

Peterson frowned and put the picture on the table. "According to this telephone call, you were seen digging in your garden last night."

"The woman is mistaken, sergeant. I spent the evening quietly in my living room reading a book."

He grinned. "I'll bet."

I refilled his coffee cup. "It was a dark night, wasn't it, sergeant? Hardly a silver of a moon."

He lit a cigarette and put the burnt match in his saucer. "Be sure to remind your lawyer about that."

Peterson's eyes flicked to the photograph momentarily. "This phone caller claims to have been a good friend of your wife."

I nodded thoughtfully. "Mrs.



NO SHROUD

Winters, no doubt. She's the widow who lives next door. But that's more than a hundred feet away and the night was dark."

"Sure. And hardly a sliver of a moon." Peterson let cigarette smoke curl from his mouth. "We've already talked to her. She says that if your wife would have gone away for any length of time, she would have been told about it."

"Evelyn's trip was quite sudden," I said. "She got the news at five and had to make the six o'clock train. I'm sure that if she had had the time, she would have gone right over and kept Mrs. Winters abreast of the news."

I glanced out of the window. The men were beginning to uproot the multiflora. "I just remembered," I said. "We have some blackberry wine."

Peterson grimaced. "I'll stick to coffee."

I got to my feet. "If you don't mind, I believe I'll have a glass."

Peterson waited until I brought back the bottle. "Mrs. Winters claims she heard three shots last night."

"I don't have a gun," I said somewhat testily. "As a matter of fact I'm frightened of them."

I HEARD footsteps in the back hallway and the man who had introduced himself as Sergeant Fallon entered the kitchen. His body was lean and he carried all his facial expression in his eyes. He went to the sink and washed his hands. "We found something."

Peterson shifted in his chair. "Well?"

"A parrot," Fallon said dryly. "We found a parrot buried out there."

I sipped my wine. "Perhaps it's Neptune. I noticed that his cage was empty."

Fallon eyed me. "You're real observant. Want to take a look at the carcass?"

"No," I said. "I can't stand looking at dead things." I sighed. "Evelyn was fond of that bird. Extremely fond."

Fallon dried his hands. "It looks a little messy, but I'd say it was shot once through the head."

Peterson leaned over the table. "Let's see your gun, Mr. Baird."

My voice was sharp. "I don't have a gun. I told you that."

Fallon called two men in from the yard and they began searching the house. He came back into the kitchen in less than five minutes carrying a small automatic by its barrel. "Twenty-five caliber. I found it in a bureau drawer. A perfect gun for a parrot and big enough for a human, if it's necessary."

He pulled the bullets out of the clip and put them on the table. Then he counted the cartridges in the box he had brought with him. "Three missing."

Peterson found my eyes. "We know where one of them is now. What about the other two?"

I licked my lips. "I don't know anything about them."

Fallon put his foot on a chair. "What now, Pete?"

Peterson shrugged. "It's a big yard. Keep digging." He peered out at the dusk. "Better put up the floodlights."

When Fallon left, I got up and turned on the kitchen lights.

Peterson stared at the photograph. "When a woman disappears we always suspect the husband first."

"I know," I said.

He took his eyes away from the photograph. "This Mrs. Winters says that some man's been dropping over here pretty regular." He hesitated a moment. "More often than you think, she suggested."

I smiled. "I wonder if she could mean Frank Grady. Why don't you ask him?"

Our eyes held for half a minute.

I sipped my wine. "I don't imagine he could remain on the police force long if it were. I believe regulations are quite strict regarding the morals of members of the department."

I smiled. "But perhaps you could cover it up. After all, you're all comrades in arms, so to speak."

HIS face flushed angry red and he reached for the kitchen phone. He dialed and waited for the connection. "Get in touch with Frank Grady," he snapped. "Tell him to come over to this address right away." He read the number and street from a slip of paper.

Fallon came back into the kitchen. He stared at me. "We found a cat. A God damned cat with a bullet through his head."

Peterson exhaled air slowly. "That's bullet number two. There's still one more." He turned to Fallon. "Keep on digging."

Fallon started for the door and then stopped. His face was thoughtful. "Pete, I'll take a look in the basement first. It's always a good bet."

Peterson and I waited silently at the kitchen table. After a while I could hear shoveling in the coal bin downstairs.

Fallon returned and tracked coal dust on the floor. "I found half a bag of cement down there."

"I used it for some masonry work," I said swiftly. "That fireplace in the yard."

Fallon grinned. "And while I was down there, I did a little looking around. I found what looks like a new patch of cement under the coal pile."

"One of the water pipes burst about a month ago," I said. "The plumber had to dig up a section of the basement."

Peterson smiled. "Suppose you give us the name of the plumber."

I shook my head. "I'm afraid I don't know his name. Evelyn always takes care of the things that have to do with the home."

Fallon grinned and went outside to the truck parked in front of the house. He came back with a jackhammer and a man to operate it and they both went downstairs.

Peterson crossed his legs and relaxed. "You guys never seem to have any imagination. You get rid of your wife and then get the bright idea of burying the body in the yard. Or maybe the basement."

He studied me and grinned. "Do you know what I'd do if I wanted to get rid of my wife?"

I said nothing.

He laughed. "I'd take

(Continued on page 48)

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NO SHROUD

(Continued from page 22)

her up north and turn off into one of them old logging roads that don't see a car in months. That's where I'd bury her. Deep in the woods. There's not a chance in a million her body would ever be found. And no body, no case. See what I mean?"

The jackhammer downstairs began pounding.

Peterson was in a good humor. "You wouldn't have to go all the way up north, for that matter. There are a few places around here that are just as good."

His eyes went over me. "You ever been in trouble with the law before?"

I considered the question for a moment and decided that there was no point in lying. "Yes. About ten years ago I was arrested for car theft. It was the only time."

Peterson grunted. "It was the only time you were caught. Isn't that what you mean?"

Yes, I thought, that's what I mean. But I said nothing.

The front doorbell rang and Peterson got up. He came back with Frank Grady.

GRADY was a tall man with square shoulders and dark hair that had a tendency to curl. He stopped in the doorway of the kitchen.

"Hello, Frank," I said. "There seems to be a little misunderstanding here."

His eyes were wary. "What's it got to do with me?" He tilted his head slightly and frowned as he caught the sound of the jackhammer.

Peterson indicated me. "He can't give a good account of where his wife is, but we've got a pretty good idea now."

"Evelyn's visiting her sister in Iowa, Frank," I said. "But apparently the sergeant doesn't believe me."

Peterson lit a cigarette. "So far we dug up a parrot and a cat. Both shot through the head. We're still digging and we got big hopes."

Understanding came to Frank's face. He darted swiftly across the room and his hands found my throat. "What the devil did you do to Evelyn?" he snarled.

Peterson pried us apart. "Take it easy, Frank. If he's got anything coming, we'll take care of it the right way."

I rubbed my throat. "I tell you I haven't done a thing to Evelyn, Frank."

Grady glared at me and his breathing was hard.

I turned to Peterson and smiled

ruefully. "Apparently Mrs. Winters was right. My wife wasn't as loyal and devoted as I had hoped."

"I wouldn't worry about that now," Peterson snapped.

"But I do," I said. "I suppose the department will take appropriate action." I smiled at Grady. "Really, Frank, I'm the one who should be angry."

He started for me again, but Peterson got between us. "Sit down! Both of you!"

Downstairs the jackhammer stopped and we heard the sound of spades.

Peterson eyed me. "You're a lot older than she was, aren't you?"

It was fifteen after seven and so I did not correct the tense of the sergeant's question. "Years mean little."

He considered me objectively. "Why did she marry you?"

I smiled faintly. "I thought it was my charm. But perhaps she wanted a base of operations. Or security."

"Security, hell!" Frank snapped. "Evelyn's the one who had the money. She owns this house. She's insured for ten thousand dollars and he's the beneficiary."

I smiled. "But then I'm insured too and Evelyn is my beneficiary. That makes it sort of even, don't you think?"

WE were silent for a few moments and then Grady turned to Peterson. "There was nothing between me and Evelyn. But I wish there would have been."

We all tensed as we listened to the slow footsteps mounting the basement stairs.

Fallon's face was both sick and angry. "A monkey," he said. "We found a damn monkey shot through the head. There wasn't anything else."

Temper brought the blood to Peterson's face. He reached across the table and grabbed my shirt. "What the hell did you do with her?"

My heart pounded against my ribs and I felt a momentary panic. "That won't do you any good, sergeant. I assure you it won't."

Fallon put his hand on Peterson's shoulder. "Take it easy, Pete."

Peterson let go of me and rubbed his forehead irritably. "I just don't get it. First he kills the parrot, then the cat, and then the monkey."

Fallon smiled grimly. "Maybe he was leading up to something bigger." He came close to me. "You still afraid of guns? Of killing?"

The phone rang and Peterson

reached for it.

His face changed as he listened. "Are you sure?"

When he hung up, it took him a minute before he could look at me. "A woman was just killed by a hit and run driver. According to her identification she was your wife."

I looked at Grady for a moment and then down at my hands.

"It happened at the railroad depot. She was just crossing the street to the bus stop."

Peterson's eyes were confused. "We'll want you to identify her."

His eyes went to Grady's white face. "You too, Grady. I want to be sure it really is Mrs. Baird."

We identified Evelyn's body and I made arrangements for the burial. I decided to ship her body back to the town where she was born. It was a little place up north, a logging town.

IT was near midnight when I got back home and made myself some lunch. When I was through eating, I went to the window. There was a light in Mrs. Winters' living room.

I left my house through the back door and walked across the yard. I rapped my fingernails lightly on one of the side windows of the living room and then moved back to the rear of the house.

After a few moments Diana Winters opened the back door and let me in.

I kissed her warm lips for a long time before I let her go. "Did you use the car I got for you?"

JUDGMENT DAY

(Continued from page 8)

The woman turned her face toward his, and Jim Ransome found himself staring into the big, brown and slightly bloodshot eyes of Mrs. John J. Clayton. Her full lips parted in a slow smile.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked. Her voice was low and throaty.

Jim Ransome swallowed hard. He decided to plunge right in. To hell with testing the water.

"No, I saved it just for you, Mrs. Clayton."

"How sweet," said Mrs. Clayton. She opened her purse and extracted a long cork-tipped cigarette from a diamond-studded gold case. "I know you. You're Jim Ransome. You work for my husband's company. Investment Department, isn't it?"

"That's right, Mrs. Clayton. I'm a clerk."

His hand trembled slightly as he lighted her cigarette. She steadied his hand with her own, and the feel of her soft, warm flesh shot a shiver of anticipation up his arm.

For a long moment he stared down into the deep gorge formed

by her breasts, wondering how he should make his pitch. Then Mrs. Clayton made it for him.

"God, what a day I've had," she said, speaking quickly, almost automatically. "First my car broke down. Then the man at the garage said he can't possibly have it fixed before tomorrow. And now, to cap it all, I've just learned my husband's gone out of town. So here I am, stuck without a way home."

Jim Ransome grabbed the bait eagerly. "Say, that's too bad, Mrs. Clayton. My car's over at the company lot. I'd sure be happy to drive you any place you want to go."

"Oh, would you really? That's sweet of you. I am in a hurry to get home. I've had one hell of a hectic day."

He climbed from his bar stool, bowed from the waist and extended his arm. "At your command."

Mrs. Clayton took his arm, and they walked silently from the Tahitian Room. The eyes of the unchosen—the other Clayton men in the cocktail lounge—tracked their progress jealously to the door.

I sighed. "As a matter of fact, I felt rather sorry for those animals, but they served their purpose. They surrounded me with perfect witness when my poor wife died."

I raised my glass. "To the police department. My air-tight alibi."

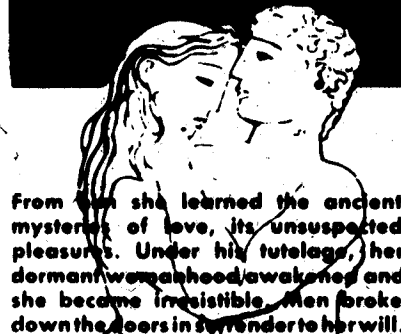
Diana smiled. "Couldn't we use your plan again?"

"No, my dear," I said. "We must never repeat ourselves. The next time we must think of something new."

Our second drink was to the next time. THE END

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